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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the role that campus residential life plays in the life of college students. While some researchers have concluded that living on-campus or off-campus has little affect on student academic achievement (Bliming, 1989; Bowman and Partin, 1993), others have expressed that on-campus living produces students with better critical thinking skills (Pascarella et al., 1993). Some investigators have examined the quality of life in residence halls (Hendershott et al., 1992), a special program for single mothers at Texas Woman's University (Chater and Hatch, 1991), and the retention of African-American students based on residency (Galicki and McEwen, 1989). The paper notes an interesting theme of the current literature base on collegiate residential housing is the lack of consistency in the findings. Also noted is the relative anonymity of housing programs and professionals in the field. However, the paper concludes that despite inconsistencies in the literature and in the body of research, residence halls can play an important role in the academic success of college students. (MDM)

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Current Research Trends in Residential Life

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Abstract

Residential life plays an important role in the academic support mission of the student affairs profession. There has been much discussion of the exact nature of this impact over the last two decades. Strong evidence exists that student success and persistence can be affected by residential life factors. Trends in residential life have also been affected by the diversification of the student body over the last quarter century. The purpose for conducting this literature review was to examine some of the key issues over the last decade of which residential life professionals need to be aware.

Bowman and Partin (1993) conducted a study to determine if there is a significant difference between the academic achievement of students that lived on campus and their off-campus counterparts, as measured by grade point average (GPA). The study was based on a survey of second semester freshmen at a small Southern university. The researchers were testing the notion that living on campus contributed significantly to academic success. However, Bowman and Partin found no statistically significant differences in grade point averages of students regardless of residence. The researchers claimed that this supported the idea that student residence was not an accurate predictor of academic success, an idea also put forth by Bliming (1989). In their conclusion, Bowman and Partin indicated that the study was limited because it did not measure the long-term impact of residential life upon students.

In contrast, Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Zusman, Inman, and Desler (1993) hypothesized that on-campus living produced students with better critical thinking skills. They studied a population of 1,000 residents at a 25,000 student Midwestern university. The level of student reading comprehension was not significantly different between the two groups. The largest gains were made in mathematical ability. The study was limited because it only measured students at one university and was longitudinally conducted throughout the students' first year.

Thompson, Samiratedu, and Rafter (1993) reached a similar conclusion to that of Pascarella et al. (1993). Thompson, Samiratedu, and Rafter claimed that progress and retention were higher among students who lived on campus, regardless of race, gender, or condition of admittance. Students engaged in remedial work were shown to have performed better than their off-campus counterparts. The participants of the study were drawn randomly from a population of 2,500 to 2,800 freshmen at a public university.

Hendershott, Wright, and Henderson (1992) conducted a survey to measure the quality of life within a university community. A random sample of 200 students at a large New England university was selected. With regard to residence halls, the study found that the students were less satisfied with university housing than with their academic or social lives. The researchers attributed this to space limitations, lack of privacy, lack of freedom, and poor maintenance that is commonly found in residence halls.

Chater and Hatch (1991) described a program underway at Texas Woman's University (TWU) for single mothers. In an effort to attract and retain these students, Texas Woman's University began offering child care and after school programs for single mothers enrolled there. A residence hall was begun by TWU strictly for single mothers and their children. The child care center was centrally located and had a low cost for the parents. The university also provided outreach services and counseling to single mothers at no cost.

Schuh, Stage, and Westfall (1991) conducted a study to measure housing paraprofessionals' knowledge of student development theory. Specifically, the researchers wanted to develop a method to measure knowledge, determine whether the training of paraprofessionals, namely resident assistants (RAs), assisted them in recognizing times to apply student development theory, and determine if there was a significant difference in recognition based on theoretical perspectives. The study was conducted at a large public residential university in the Midwest. Of the perspectives measured, Chickering (1969) produced the best results with recognition of the proper situation in which to apply student development theory.

Galicki and McEwen (1989) studied the effects of retention of African-American students based on residency. The authors found evidence to support Chickering's notion that living on campus can aid in the increase of student persistence. While African-American student persistence is less than white students, according to previous research, the researchers discovered that persistence is higher among those African-American students living on campus. The benefits of living on campus affected members of both ethnic groups in a similar fashion.

Bliming (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of twenty-one studies of the relationship between academic performance and living on campus over the period of 1966 to 1987. Bliming found that there was no evidence to support the idea that the residence halls negatively impact academic performance because of

their boisterous nature. Alternatively, there was little evidence to support the notion that residence halls greatly improve academic performance. There was some evidence that students who live in residence halls do perform marginally better than those who live in fraternities and sororities.

Discussion

Despite some inconsistencies in the literature and research body, residence halls can play an important role in the academic success of students during college. This role is multidimensional, and relates to how students feel about their lives on campus, how important students view studying and working to obtain good grades, and with the intellectual climate which is established between students and among student groups. Campus housing has also been identified as playing an important part in student recruitment and retention. Although not a singular dominant factor, housing facilities can help add credibility and desirability to campus, or alternatively, may discourage potential students who are somewhat in doubt about choosing a college.

What is perhaps most interesting about the themes of the current literature base on collegiate residential housing is the lack of consistency in findings and the relative anonymity of housing programs and professionals. Student affairs administrators appear anxious to address broad issues in higher education which demand media attention, such as student governance and Greek life, but appear hesitant to embrace housing related issues. Residential

programming plays a key role in college student development, and college administrators and administration preparation graduate programs must take a more active role in examining and supporting residential life as a construct of college student success.

Research and literature related to housing is also notable due to the approaches taken to studying housing. Most of the literature was taken from alternative viewpoints, i.e., how does housing mediate some variable, instead of descriptions and identifications of housing programming. Housing professionals are culturally seen as a fraternity among themselves, yet this body has not, according to the research presented here, transcended the more traditional and dominant areas of student affairs administration. As college student populations change and competition increases for the valuable traditional-aged college student, housing professionals have the potential to play a considerable role in the recruitment, retention, and success of college students. These professionals, however, must become more active in "telling their story" of what they do, how they do it, and how these activities fit into the overall picture of higher education.

Future research and writing on college residential life should take some of these things into consideration, and must also look for opportunities to expound the success stories of housing in non-traditional forums. Only in self-promotion and guidance can housing professionals and programs begin to get the attention they deserve.

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